

Review

Developing urban ecotourism in Kenyan cities: A sustainable approach

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Tourism is not only a powerful social and economic force but also a factor in the physical environment as well. It has the power to improve the environment, provide funds for conservation, preserve culture and history, to set sustainable use limits and to protect natural attractions. Ecotourism potentially provides a sustainable approach to development. A frequently cited definition of ecotourism originated with The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) which states “ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas which conserve the environment and sustains the well-being of local people.” The conceptualization of urban ecotourism therefore, can be seen through the position of cities as tourism destinations and is further described through that take into account supply/ facility and demand/ user. This paper discusses the various benefits of ecotourism operations based in urban environments in Kenya and indeed the three cities, Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu and their sustainability.

Key words: Tourism, ecotourism, urban ecotours

INTRODUCTION

Applying the practices of ecotourism to an urban environment is a relatively new concept that merits development in multiple cities including Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu in Kenya. The concept of urban green tourism (urban ecotourism), as pioneered by Toronto's Green Tourism Association, is a working example that demonstrates how a city can promote itself, individual businesses and attractions to provide a unique tourism experience and generate demand for sustainability. Although the existence of urban tourism has been subject to much criticism and questioning. Subsequent discussion, especially in the 1990s, by various authors managed to establish urban tourism, in the early 2000's, as a distinctive knowledge area within both the urban development and tourism disciplines (Dodds and Joppe, 2001).

Therefore, the conceptualization of urban ecotourism should be seen through the position of cities as tourism destinations and should further be described through approaches that take into account supply/facility and demand/user. In addition to this, approaches through supply/facility and demand/user are also ways in which urban ecotourism can be conceptualized. Understanding urban ecotourism through its supply-side or facilities has advantages of visibility, identifiability and the ability to be mapped and located. The significance of supply-side

facilities can be better explained when the nature of demand/ users in the city is understood. In relation to these questions there is a need to assess various motives behind tourists' decisions to visit the city and thereby, develop a typology of the urban ecotourist.

Kenya's ecotourism

The recent surge in popularity of ecotourism has much to do with the search for a richer holiday experience by the guest (Okech, 2007). Kenya has been a trailblazer in ecotourism. It gave birth to some of Africa's earliest experiments in community-based conservation using park and tourism revenues and began the first efforts to systematically adopt ecotourism principles and practices in its national park system (Honey, 2008). Ballantine and Eagles (1994) evaluated Canadian tourists to Kenya against a definition consisting of three criteria.

Their criteria were established to determine a visitor's status as an 'ecotourist' and encompass three dimensions: the social motive (educational component); the desire to visit 'wilderness/ undisturbed areas'; and a temporal commitment. These are very broad criteria and it is no surprise that 84% of Canadian visitors to Kenya who were surveyed qualified as ecotourists. It may be argued

that under these criteria the definition of the ecotourist is so general to be meaningless.

A more detailed checklist for ecotourism is provided by Butler (1992) in Accott et al. (1998), Higham and Luck (2002). Despite the growth of both private reserves and beach tourism, the heart of Kenya's nature tourism and ecotourism industry remains its national parks and reserves and their surrounding buffer zones. It is in these areas that Kenya has conducted its most innovative and long-term ecotourism experiments.

Over the course of three decades, the community conservation schemes in most parts of the country including Amboseli and Masai Mara have followed somewhat different paths but produce some common lessons. These experiments (Honey, 2008) are significant because they were large, government-backed initiatives involving the country's foremost tourist attractions, sizeable populations and at times, international conservation and lending agencies. They represent the most concerted, long term efforts in Africa to apply ecotourism principles on a national scale.

Today there exists concerns that ecotourism may have stagnated and requires redirecting. This thinking emerges out of observations that donor funding for development of infrastructure that supports ecotourism has significantly reduced (Gona, 2006). Funding is now directed at capacity building for communities and development of plans.

Available information on ecotourism in Kenya reveals a lot about the institutional structure, distribution, innovations, stakeholders, management structures/models and the product. However, there is very little information on the size of the sector in terms of number of visitors it receives, the proportion it contributes to the overall tourism income and the amount of investment that has gone into its development. The distribution of ecotourism in Kenya can be described as uneven. In analyzing Kenya's ecotourism development, the country can be divided into regions.

These are the North/South Coast, the Rift region, Nyanza / Western region, Northern Kenya, Tsavo / Taita region, Amboseli / Kajiado region and the Narok / Transmara region. It is evident that this categorization has been largely influenced by the existing tourism circuit and administrative boundaries. In strict terms, half of these regions are not developed.

This means that they are not well connected by road and/or air, they have a few and sometimes sub-standard accommodation facilities, recreation opportunities are limited and service is poor. Some of the factors that have contributed to this disparity in development include over reliance on wildlife and beach product, uneven structure development, undefined/unclear resource ownership regimes, socio-economic activities of local people, investment biases and disparities in endowment with attractive physical and cultural resources.

The growth and development of ecotourism in Kenya has strong links to development of mass tourism. Ecotourism easily took root in areas that had been opened up by con-

ventional tourism through national parks/reserve.

RATIONALE FOR URBAN ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT

The cases outlined in this article offer greater ecological benefit and less potential for environmental impact in Kenyan Cities. The rationale for this statement is expounded below.

Restoration of natural areas

Ecotourism in urban environments takes place in areas that offer some degree of naturalness in settings that have otherwise been heavily modified by previous human activities. These areas provide much potential for the restoration of sites that have previously been degraded, impacted or destroyed by industrial and commercial activities.

The environmental impacts of ecotourism

Tourism in natural areas often places considerable stress on the environment, such as erosion, noise and air pollution, due to issues of access (Mathieson and Wall, 1987). Contrary to definitions of ecotourism, but creditworthy nonetheless, urban ecotourism is preferable in terms of the environmental impacts of transportation. Flognfeldt (1997) is critical of the 'green veneer' of ecotourism in remote areas of Norway due to the environmental impacts of transporting visitors.

In New Zealand many visitors to natural areas are transported by our coach, fixed wing aircraft, marine vessels and helicopter or transport themselves via private/rental vehicles and campervans. These means of transportation bring with them to natural areas issues of air pollution, noise and the development of infrastructures such as airstrips, coach terminals, car parks and associated services (Kearsley and Higham, 1997). Where new areas are developed for recreation and tourism, compromise of aesthetic values and degradation of the environment often follow.

All are considered to degrade the naturalness of the very resource that is attracting visitors in the first instance (Krippendorf, 1994). Tourists participating in urban ecotours may use existing infrastructure, including public transport to and from sites or departure points. Many such tours use hardened environments that are regularly used by the local population.

Education

Interpretation and education is, according to some observers, a crucial part of ecotourism (Buckley, 1994; Eagles, 1997; Higham and Luck, 2002). Many see education as the feature that distinguishes ecotourism from other

forms of nature-based tourism (Orams, 1995). The highest aspirations of the ecotourism sector relate to changing the attitudes and values of visitors in an attempt to foster and encourage pro-environmental behavior (Beaumont, 1998; Boo, 1990; Orams, 1995 and 1997).

The majority of visitors to ecotourism attractions in Kenya consider it important to learn about the subject of their attention. Bearing this in mind, urban ecotours should present an important opportunity for mass education. Orams (1995) suggests that ecotourism should move 'beyond mere enjoyment to incorporate learning and to facilitate attitude and behavior change.' In order to influence the travelers' attitudes and behavior towards issues of conservation and protection, Mark and Weiler (1998) argue that, ecotours must be intellectually challenging and emotionally stimulating.

It has been noted that ecotourism in pristine natural environments is an exercise in 'preaching to converted' (Beaumont, 1998). However many participants in urban ecotours may not be ecotours per se but rather a more 'generalist' visitor type (Duffus and Dearden, 1990). This offers the opportunity for conservation issue to be communicated to a wider audience.

Financial Viability

Demand for ecotours in an urban environment offers a wide catchment of potential participants, more so, than ecotours in remote areas. This can be explained by relatively easy access to the site or departing point. The time and cost commitments of access dictate distance decay thresholds associated with travel to ecotourism operations in remote areas. However, once in the city during a holiday, a large number of tourists may add an urban ecotour to their general sightseeing schedule. This suggests that capacity rates for such operations may be higher and more reliable.

Higher capacity rates bring with it the opportunity to increase the guide; guest ratio and therefore provide a higher standard of visitor operation. Seasonal patterns of urban tourism are generally less extreme than is the case at nature-based tourism operations. Tourism at urban destinations is usually dictated more by human or institutional factors, than natural phenomena associated with seasons and climate. These factors act to increase the financial viability of ecotourism operations.

Social impacts

Fennell (1999) present a consideration of the social impacts of tourism and their relevance to ecotourism. He cites the work of Ryan (1991) who contributes a catalogue of factors that determine the extent to which social impacts associated with tourism are likely to occur. These include accessibility of the tourist destination, differences in cultural norms between tourist generating and tourism receiving zones, degree of exposure to other forces of

technological, social and economic changes, size of the destination area and therefore, density of the tourist population.

Fennell (1999) proceeds to observe that 'as ecotourism continues to diversify and exploit relatively untouched regions and cultures, there is the danger that (negative social impacts) will occur'. These factors suggest that urban destinations are less likely to generate negative social change than apply in the scenario described by Fennell (1999). Although ecotourism is considered an enlightened development approach to tourism and is being aggressively pursued as a marketing strategy by governments and businesses alike, there has been almost no attempt to link it with more urban environments.

Indeed, nature tourism and ecotourism are all too often used interchangeably, even though nature tourism is not necessarily, non-consumptive nor sustainable in its focus. Almost every country in the world has now added some ecotourism product to its list of offerings for both the international and domestic visitor markets, although there does not seem to be a consistent definition of what constitutes "ecotourism".

At its best, ecotourism offers a viable combination of ecological and cultural protection, increased local awareness of the value of preserving the natural and cultural environments and local economic development. It is most often associated with exotic, undisturbed, remote (or at least rural) areas. In Kenya, ecotourism tends to be equated with nature tourism as long as it does not take place in a major urban centre.

THE NEED TO "GREEN" MASS TOURISM SUPPLIERS

Product development, policy, planning and marketing can all be instituted in ways to ensure that tourists, host population and investors reap the long-term benefits of a vibrant and healthy tourism industry (Husbands and Harrison, 1996). Many sources suggest that tourism has the potential to conserve and protect natural resources; however, most efforts have been focused towards advancing the economic objectives rather than protecting the very resources that attract visitors (Wight, 1993; Pearce, 1995).

"Where it has been adopted in the tourism industry, it has tended to be accepted for three reasons: economics, public relations and marketing" (Butler, 1998). Just because tourists do not tend to be as noticeable in cities as they often are in smaller communities or lesser developed countries, does not mean that they do not have a significant impact on their infrastructure, natural resources, social and cultural environment.

Tourism by its very nature is highly resource consumptive and waste-intensive. Although there have been a rapidly increasing number of codes of ethics adopted by various tourism-related organizations, corporations such as CP Hotels and Resorts (now Fair-Mont Hotels and Re-

sorts), Inter-Continental Hotels, British Airways to name but some of the most recognized environmentally responsible leaders in the tourism industry, efforts to become more environmentally and socially conscious have been sporadic at best. Even though environmental technologies are widely available and being successfully applied by some entrepreneurs, the level of take up is negligible.

One reason is the fragmented nature of the industry itself, which makes it difficult to reach each operator. Others might be a lack of environmental awareness or lack of resources (particularly for smaller operators whose finances are often limited) to build up their environmental management and technological know-how (Gibson et al., 2003). Efforts are often further hampered by their lack of locational concentration, making recycling or composting, for instance, too costly. Furthermore, suppliers will not accommodate the demands to reduce packaging, as an example, unless the purchaser represents a sizeable piece of business.

ATTRIBUTES FOR URBAN ECOTOURISM

The attributes for urban ecotourism include the following identified by Dodds and Joppe (2003):

- (i) **Environmental responsibility** - protecting, conserving, and/or enhancing nature and the physical environment to ensure the long term health of the life-sustaining ecosystem.
- (ii) **Local economic vitality** - Supporting local economies, businesses and communities to ensure economic vitality and sustainability.
- (iii) **Cultural sensitivity** - Respecting and appreciating cultures and cultural diversity so as to ensure the continued well-being of local or host cultures.
- (iv) **Experiential richness** - Providing enriching and satisfying experiences through active, personal and meaningful participation in, and involvement with, nature, people, places and/or cultures.

A better understanding therefore of the linkages between tourism and the environment and conservation and marketing should be identified to demonstrate a reconciliation of 'green' or environmental habits to the industry through environmentally responsible action.

Long-term viability and access to all are some of the main benefits of urban ecotourism. The positive benefit can be achieved through a number of areas:

Awareness

- (i) Local small businesses will receive international exposure that an individual marketing effort could not afford.
- (ii) Residents and tourist awareness level of Kenya's Cities' 'green' options will increase as a map will provide one collective source of ecotourism information in the city

(iii) International exposure to the concept of urban ecotourism as tourism will be seen through the variety of media articles and requests for further urban ecotourism information by tourist offices and academic institutes.

(iv) Overall awareness of environmental issues and projects being undertaken by the city as a whole (the map will bring to the foreground many issues such as smoke, pollution, urban sprawl, protection of natural and heritage sites, tourism marketing, etc.).

Reach

The maps produced should be free there by making them accessible to a wide variety of target markets;

Accessibility

All key information for explorers in one source. The map to provide background information, tips to be green, contact phone numbers, addresses, descriptions and more.

Expansion

Additional information and overall exposure and further funding options leading to the expansion of the organization and many new or expanded projects (membership, newsletters, web site and on-line resource center, ecotourism tourist guidebook, and event and conference attendance and presentations).

Enhanced corporate image

Businesses and tourist industry's corporate 'eco' or environmentally conscious image enhanced through their relationship to the map;

Partnership

The collection of information and also distribution reinforced and developed partnerships between existing 'ecotourism' efforts in the Cities and the map will provide a reliable collective source of information.

THE ISSUE OF SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability as a concept involves a number of different strands. Environmental, ecological and economic factors assume that it is applicable in the technical sciences, whereas social and political factors relate to power and values. Within these strands, questions of scale, family, community, region, timescale, project life, indefinite and so on are critical elements. These ideas are illustrated most clearly using examples that gradually bring them closer to tourism applications (France, 1997).

Sustainability has emerged as a popular term and has been widely viewed as holding considerable promise as a vehicle for addressing the problems of negative tourism impacts and maintaining its long-term viability (Liu, 2003; Page and Thorn, 2002). The forecasting study conducted by the WTO to examine how the tourism industry and particularly tourism demand, is likely to evolve in the next twenty years provides a valuable framework to the discussion about sustainability in tourism. The results indicate that international tourist arrivals are likely to increase at an annual average rate of around 4%, to reach nearly 1.5 billion by the year 2020, that is almost three times the number of arrivals recorded in 1998 (Yunis, 2002b).

The impacts that these hundreds of millions of tourists moving around the globe may cause upon the natural environment and upon the social and cultural fabrics of host communities need to be anticipated, carefully studied, prevented to the extent possible and continuously monitored if tourism is to effectively contribute to sustainable development. This needs to be clearly understood because there are complex and close relationships between tourism, natural and cultural environments (Yunis, 2002a).

In line with the paradigm of sustainable tourism it is believed that negative effects can be avoided or minimized if tourism development is thoroughly planned and controlled (Gossling, 2000). The emergence of the concept of sustainable development according to Hardy et al. (2002) marked a convergence between economic development and environmentalism.

This convergence was officially illustrated at the Stockholm Conference on Humans and the Environment in 1972, the first of a series of major UN conferences on global issues related to the environment. The conference promoted the concept of eco-development whereby cultural, social and ecological goals were integrated with development. The philosophy of this concept was small, beautiful, typifying the eco-development approach and this was subsequently incorporated into the strategic plans of many industries, including tourism.

Thus, Sharpley (2000) attests that the theory of sustainable development can be usefully explored by combining development theory with the concept of sustainability. Inevitably this over-simplifies the complex amalgam of political, economic, cultural and ecological processes encompassed by sustainable development. A number of commentators argue that corporate environmental policies not only make increasingly good business sense, but they might even be essential for the long-term economic survival of businesses (Hawken, 1993; Porter, 1991; Winter, 1988).

Environmental and cultural concerns should be integral to the corporate culture of tourism businesses and be reflected in all their strategic and operational actions. However, while self-regulation by commercial tourism organisations can help reduce resource misuse, the

scope for businesses to take the lead and initiate sustainable measures tends to be restricted by the intense competition of the market economy.

Conclusion

It makes sense to use the fact that 'ecotourism' sells for marketing purposes, but only when the product labelling conforms with both consumer expectations and industry standards (Wight, 1993). The 'ecotourism' concept allows the tourism industry to improve its image and practices while continuing a commercial profit strategy. If ecotourism is used solely for image purposes, rather than an approach adopted in practice, the very landscape, culture and heritage that provides the initial attractions will disappear.

To date there has been little marketing and education directed at urban tourists about supporting sustainable environment. Many of the millions of tourists, who visit Nairobi, use the city as a gateway to other destinations, including Mombasa and Kisumu successfully marketing the concept of sustainability to visitors will hopefully influence tourists behaviour on other destinations visited.

Six key strategies are therefore recommended when marketing ecotourism products:

Broad distribution: Your product must be accessible to your market through as many key locations as possible. Systems to facilitate both distribution and tracking should be set up in advance.

Partnership development: Many environmental or tourism agencies share a common goal of awareness. Contact anyone who maybe linked to the tourism/environmental industry and show them your game plan, many will have contacts to share or facilities already setup that can be adopted in exchange for marketing or media attention.

Show bottom line: Small and large businesses need to see a return on investment. Marketing initiatives have to focus on exposure for all avenues of this niche market and how the product or campaign will ultimately bring more visitors through their doors.

Ownership: Green sells! Doing a good deed such as recycling, promoting local culture or heritage, buying locally made products etc will go a long way. Make your customers and business associates buy-in and get ownership of the 'green' idea so that they in turn will market themselves and ultimately you in this positive light.

User friendly products: 'Eco' marketing can be converting the converted (those who already undertake green activities or support your mission). To convert the 'other' customers, make sure you provide products that give your customer easy options and alternatives that require little effort on their part to adapt or undertake.

Practice what you preach: The organization should be seen to be environmentally and culturally sensitive, not just promote this to others. All promotional materials should be made to the highest environmental standards possible, e.g. 100% post consumer recycling content, recycled and/or vegetable ink, etc. In addition, staff should be knowledgeable in environmental as well as tourism matters.

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